



**Manchester  
Metropolitan  
University**

---

[Barry, Siobhan](#) (2019) Flights of Fancy - The Modernist Terminal in the 21st Century: The Cases of Gander International Airport, Canada and Trans World Airlines, USA. *Studies in History and Theory of Architecture*, 7. pp. 157-170. ISSN 2344-6544

---

**Downloaded from:** <http://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/625726/>

**Version:** Published Version

**Publisher:** Editura Universitară „Ion Mincu” / “Ion Mincu” University Press, Bucharest

**Usage rights:** Creative Commons: Attribution 4.0

Please cite the published version

<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk>

# Flights of Fancy – the Modernist Terminal in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Cases of Gander International Airport, Canada and Trans World Airlines, USA

**Siobhan Barry**

Senior Lecturer, Manchester School of Architecture, United Kingdom

**KEYWORDS:** modernist airport; mid-century design; Gander; TWA; conservation; restoration

*The past is a foreign country whose features are shaped by today's predilections, its strangeness domesticated by our own preservation of its vestiges.<sup>1</sup>*

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century Modernist Icons and Conservation

Architectural icons of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century are now widely appreciated even in the field of conservation, however this seems less true for post World War II architectural gems. Modernism was inexorably linked with “the new,” the cutting edge of the avant-garde, a machine age that promised material, structural, typological and aesthetic innovation in order to meet the challenge of new uses (for example airport terminals) and the economy of mass society – a promising vision in direct contrast with the structural limitation, the culture of tectonics and ornament of the previous century. The modernist design ethic, conventionally defined as “providing instruments rather than creating monuments,”<sup>2</sup> was used to justify any interventions that circumstances might require. This logic would dictate that something conceived only as a tool should simply be discarded when it has outlived its purpose. However, we are now at a conservation crossroads where some modernist treasures survive, to be reused and adapted for 21<sup>st</sup> century viability and some simply fall by the wayside, destined to deteriorate and crumble to make way for the “new” they once so eloquently epitomized.

In essence, the culture of architectural preservation for the buildings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is about the management of change.<sup>3</sup> Architecture reflects demands and expectations, in this case the forceful, definite and immediate ones of modern materialist culture. Then when the demands and expectations alter, architecture gets into difficulty and has to be changed. This process of “changing” is uniquely demanding when considering the plight of the modernist airport terminal. The terminal presents a unique problem, the practical drawbacks of airport infrastructure, and the continual process of adaptation and renewal necessary to remain financially viable and relevant means that, as Banham suggested, the airport is “always unfinished,” and “always out of date.”<sup>4</sup> A curious dichotomy exists within this logic; airports are second only to art galleries and museums in the pantheon of projects that the world's greatest architects most aspire to,<sup>5</sup> yet they are continually in a state of transition and occupy a transient moment in the architectural canon.

1 David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), xvii.

2 John Allan, “Points of Balance: Patterns of Practice in the Conservation of Modern Architecture,” in *Conservation of Modern Architecture*, ed. Susan Macdonald et al (Shaftesbury: Donhead Publishing, 2007), 17.

3 Andrew Saint, “Philosophical Principles of Modern Conservation,” in *Modern Matters: Principles and Practice in Conserving Recent Architecture*, ed. Susan Macdonald (Shaftesbury: Donhead Publishing, 1996), 22.

4 Reyner Banham, “The Obsolescent Airport,” *Architectural Review* (October 1962): 252-253.

5 Hugh Pearman, *Airports: A Century of Architecture* (London: Laurence King, 2004), 13.

Fig. 1: Gander Airport exterior viewed from the former VIP lounge

Fig. 2: Gander Airport, international departure lounge, showing the relationship between Kenneth Lochhead's mural and the interior space

Fig. 3: Gander Airport, Primasteel furniture designed by Robin Bush

Airports are a curious mix of the dynamic and the static,<sup>6</sup> occupation is in a continual state of flux before moving on somewhere else. The modernist airport terminal was designed to exemplify speed, luxury and most importantly to look forward to the “new” inspiration of the Jet Age. America adopted the airport as a private enterprise, a symbol of a traveling elite, where airlines chose the cream of the architectural canon to give vision and structure to their corporate brand. Canada chose to employ the modernist terminal as a national brand. The Canadian urbanizing capitalist society coming out of the Second World War was prepared to buy freedom and identity within mass culture. The country's imposed amnesia of the recent horrors of war established a new faith in all things modern.<sup>7</sup> Both educated middle-class consumers and major corporations (both public and private) were prepared to embrace the modern non-radical avant-garde artist or architect in establishing a national identity.

### Gander International Airport, Canada

The Canadian Department of Transport, in a desire to show Canada as a forward thinking, modern nation, concentrated their efforts into funding an expansive scheme of airport building across the country. They began with Gander Airport. This was a deliberate choice, for many the terminal at Gander was their first glimpse of Canada and it was an introduction that often fell short of spectacular. The air force base that Gander had once been was basic and utilitarian, consisting of huts and converted hangars that were woefully insufficient for the huge amount of transatlantic traffic the airport had to contend with. Novelist Christopher Isherwood recalled that Gander's “bare white waiting-hall, with its table of simple refreshments, seemed very much a frontier post.”<sup>8</sup> This was not just the case for Gander, Saturday Night magazine pronounced Canada's airports as “among the world's worst.”<sup>9</sup> whilst the Globe and Mail deemed them ‘squalid,’<sup>10</sup> singling out Gander. (Fig. 1)

In response to these damning indictments a federally funded building program was commissioned, starting with Newfoundland and moving west. Gander was the test case<sup>11</sup> and template. By the 1950s Gander was handling 13,000 aircraft annually and some quarter of a million passengers. To cope with this number of passengers, the government authorized a massive new terminal at a cost of \$3m.<sup>12</sup> Especially for its redevelopment the Department of Transport wished for a glamorous, futuristic design, commissioning the latest furniture and fine art by Canadian artists and designers, with the express intention of projecting a “luxurious, cosmopolitan, forward-thinking image of Canada,”<sup>13</sup> a Canada which had “come of age.”<sup>14</sup>

At the time of the inauguration of the new terminal at Gander International Airport on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1959, Gander was the most important airport in the world. Opened by Queen Elizabeth II,

6 Ibid., 14.

7 Andrew Waldron, “Modernism in Canadian Architecture: An Overview,” paper presented at *Conserving the Modern in Canada: Buildings, ensembles and sites*, Trent University, Peterborough (May 6-8, 2005).

8 Nancy Macdonald, “An airport that time, happily, forgot: for design aficionados, Gander's languishing air terminal is a forgotten modernist treasure,” *Maclean's* (April 23 2007), 56.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Andrew Garnett, “Where the Sixties never stopped swinging, (Gander International Airport, Canada),” <https://thebeautyoftransport.com/2014/09/10/where-the-sixties-never-stopped-swinging-gander-international-airport-canada/>, last accessed July 5, 2019.

13 Macdonald, “An airport that time forgot,” 56.

14 Ibid.





Gander was the only stopping point *en-route* between New York and London, trans-Atlantic flights had to land there to refuel; Gander was Crossroads of the World.<sup>15</sup> The architects, Craig, Madill, Horwood, Abram and Ingleson of Toronto, Ottawa and St. John's, designed a rather unprepossessing exterior (Fig. 1), reminiscent of many contemporary modernist terminals. Clad with a colorful curtain wall, it was a flat roofed structure with a control tower at the center of low-rise wings.<sup>16</sup> However, the interior of the international lounge was something special, exploring aspects of Modernism particular to Canadian regions<sup>17</sup>; "The Beacon," a newspaper in Gander, declared that the refurbished airport was "bound to convince every first-time arrival from overseas that this, then, is paradise."<sup>18</sup> This is now a story of an astonishing interior design and the terminals rapid descent into near complete obsolescence, a story of what happens when national pride and technological development meet each other head on.<sup>19</sup>

### The International Lounge at Gander Airport

Considered to be the "single most important modernist room in Canada,"<sup>20</sup> according to Alan C. Elder, curator of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the International Lounge is a perfectly preserved victim of its own success (Fig. 2). The solid business case for the federally funded expansion and renovation of Gander Airport soon evaporated. By the end of the 1950s, almost as soon as the new terminal opened, a new generation of jet aircraft had been developed with far longer ranges that made refuelling stop-overs in Gander largely redundant. The advertising slogan of the time; "No Goose, No Gander" perfectly summed up the non-stop service.<sup>21</sup> As a result, Gander never really fulfilled its potential and it became a white elephant almost as soon as it opened.<sup>22</sup> The advances in technology that it had been designed to promote, rendered it obsolete within a few years.

The interior of the terminal's international departure lounge retains its original appearance today, with the exception of a glazed aluminum corridor, added later for security reasons (Fig. 5). The original terrazzo floor is in perfect condition, its abstract pattern evoking the cubist style of Piet Mondrian (1872-1944). The Primasteel furniture designed by Canadian Robin Bush for Herman Millar (Fig. 3) and used in many Canadian department of transport buildings is still in use, unthinkable in any other airport terminal of its time. Even the furniture arrangement remains unaltered,<sup>23</sup> arranged in alcoves to perfectly reference and match the scale and geometry of the floor pattern. Overlooking the lounge and painted *in situ* is a 22 m wide mural entitled "Flight and its Allegories" painted in egg tempura by the Canadian artist Kenneth Lochhead, a founding member of the Regina Five. The commission for the mural required the artist to muse upon the subject of flight interestingly with no reference to aeronautical transport.

The influence and exhibition of Canadian design is paramount throughout the interiors design, although the Eames' were commissioned with designing a variety of seating throughout the space, the Canadian government stipulated that they must be manufactured in Canada. Upstairs in the old VIP lounge, which has been repurposed as an additional waiting area, the original yellow Chadwick sectional furniture designed by Charles and Ray Eames (Fig. 4) is still

15 Adam Gollner, "Gander Airport: When the going Was Good," *New York Times* (March 20, 2005).

16 Robert Mellin, *Newfoundland Modern: Architecture in the Smallwood Years 1949-1972* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), 143.

17 Waldron, "Modernism in Canadian Architecture."

18 Gollner, "Gander Airport."

19 Garnett, "Where the Sixties never stopped."

20 Mellin, *Newfoundland Modern*, 143.

21 Macdonald, "An airport that time forgot"

22 Garnett, "Where the Sixties never stopped."

23 Macdonald, "An airport that time forgot."





Fig. 4: Gander Airport, VIP lounge, Eames' Chadwick sectional furniture seen in perfect condition

in use, as are their fiberglass chairs in the ladies' powder room. However, the Eames' Aluminum Group chairs, covered with an Alexander Girard fabric, have not survived the ravages of time.<sup>24</sup>

The staircase to the departure area references the terrazzo pattern main floor, made of terrazzo covered slabs it gently curves out at the base, imparting a sense of movement in expectation of the flight to come, whilst providing a visual counterpoint for the orthogonal geometry of the lounge. The staircase and mezzanine guardrails have sloped wooden handrails mounted on top of tapered posts made out of flat-stock aluminum.<sup>25</sup> As in Eero Saarinen's TWA building the interiors are expertly designed and curated, the scale and proportion of each element perfect in its surroundings.

Yet it is not only the immaculately preserved interior that makes Gander unique. The V.I.P. room guest list reads like a who's who of 20<sup>th</sup> century arts, ideas and politics. The Beatles first set foot on North American soil at Gander. The VIP guest book is littered with the signatures of the rich and famous: Frank Sinatra, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Winston Churchill, Elvis Presley, Nikita Khrushchev, Marlene Dietrich, the king of Sweden, Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor and Ingrid Bergman.<sup>26</sup> This all pays testament to the fact that Gander once was one of the most cosmopolitan destinations in the world.

The completeness of the interior and the preserved perfection of space perfectly echo the original intent for the scheme. The airport's sudden and dramatic downturn in fortune has meant that the international lounge is a perfect time capsule of early 1960s air travel. Generally, modern architecture has been altered in some way in order to meet the demands and requirements of its contemporary occupants. Gander is perfectly preserved, a conservationists' dream, discovered intact and authentic in a "prelapsarian state of senile grace."<sup>27</sup> A busy terminal would have been remodeled over the years, its original fittings wearing out and being replaced, redecoration carried out, and new retail units being built to serve passengers, wiping out some or all of the original design in the process.<sup>28</sup> It is a process visible at any contemporary airport, generationally commensurate with Gander, which has retained its passenger flows. How much of the original design is left at any 1960s terminal which has remained heavily used?

<sup>24</sup> Gollner, "Gander Airport."

<sup>25</sup> Mellin, *Newfoundland Modern*, 143.

<sup>26</sup> Gollner, "Gander Airport."

<sup>27</sup> Allan, "Points of Balance," 16.

<sup>28</sup> Garnett, "Where the Sixties never stopped."

### Flight or Fight: Terminal Preservation

Unfortunately, being achingly stylish is not enough for Gander's terminal to justify its current situation. It is a huge, and hugely expensive, building to operate given its low usage. It is frankly miraculous that the international lounge still remains intact, even down to the furniture placement, sixty years after its opening. As with most architecture in need of conservation, economic viability has caught up with it. In April 2014, the Gander International Airport Authority (GIAA) announced plans to replace its existing terminal with a smaller, more efficient building. Their rationale was simple, passenger traffic numbers were increasing doubling over the previous decade, with forecasts for continued growth.<sup>29</sup> Strategic analysis saw that the current terminal building would provide plenty of room to grow, but that room was in all the wrong places. A potential new terminal building could accommodate three times the current capacity in the critical arrivals and departures areas, and dramatically reduce operating costs.<sup>30</sup> Budgetary concerns have made the airport unwilling to continue funding the vast over-provision of facilities that the terminal building represents. This is a sad indictment that Gander may soon join the 21% of Canada's built heritage has been lost in the past 30 years.<sup>31</sup>

News of the airports intention to replace the terminal sparked an initiative to "save Gander's International Terminal," an online petition quickly garnered more than a thousand signatures, earning the building a position on Heritage Canada's 2014 list of the nation's "top ten endangered places."<sup>32</sup> However, after an initial surge in interest the initiative had failed to garner the required government support. With many of the building systems deemed beyond their useful service life, necessary repairs and maintenance costs estimated to millions of dollars, and energy expenses nearing \$900,000 in 2013, no level of government was interested in designating the terminal an official heritage site, regardless of its significance.<sup>33</sup> Preservation of the lounge itself posed unique problems. The GIAA are the owners of an historic interior replete with original furnishings and finishes that occupies largely redundant square footage in a building where every inch is required to make money. The president and CEO of Gander Airport Authority perfectly expressed the corporate sentiment regarding preservation versus demolition: "To put it bluntly, we're not in the museum business."<sup>34</sup>

What to do and how to approach the possible adaptation and/or reuse of Gander airport without destroying or permanently harming much of what heritage advocates sought to save is a complex minefield of emotion, opinion and ultimately economics. As Saint has observed, a great deal of the existing official conservation system is geared towards sheer rarity,<sup>35</sup> the difficulties in protecting modern architecture abound due to their inherent design thesis. They were designed to exemplify the machine age, new materials, mass production and the eminently replicable nature of design. Modern architecture, more than any other has more sisters or cousins of its own age, generally lacking in the unique rarity Saint describes. Gander was a template for a national movement of Canadian art, design and commerce, its form and its ideas were replicated across the nation, however, whilst the essence remains its sister airports have succumbed to the fiduciary renovations necessary for busy passenger terminals. With Gander, the Modern is rare again.

29 Jane Severs, "Gander's Glorious Room," *Canadian Architect* (March 12, 2015): 28.

30 Ibid.

31 John H. Stubbs and Emily G. Makas, *Architectural Conservation in Europe and the Americas* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 501.

32 Severs, "Gander's Glorious Room."

33 Ibid., 29.

34 "Gander international airport's historic lounge at risk amid growing costs," *National Post*, <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/gander-international-airports-historic-lounge-at-risk-amid-growing-costs>, last modified January 24 2015.

35 Andrew Saint, "Philosophical Principles," 17.



Fig. 5: Gander Airport, the glass tunnel, the only later addition to the space, bisects the international lounge

The issue of Gander is a unique problem. Perfectly preserved, it sits far away from the eyes of the world in a small town in Newfoundland. The money generated from the renovation of other modernist icons of the Jet Age cannot be found there. Unless Gander comes to the masses, how will the masses come to it? Conservators have been looking into the possibility of partial preservation; relocation of the whole structure is not only impractical but also impossible, the terrazzo flooring would never survive a move. Creative recycling is a potential possibility, as is preservation by record with the original eventually being removed. In the case of Gander's International Departures Lounge, rethinking the process required letting go of the emphatic demand to save the space, and replacing it with a question: *can* the lounge be saved?<sup>36</sup> This is more than semantics. In addition to economics, there are structural, mechanical and code compliance issues to be assessed.

It is an emotive topic, and one that has sparked interest and support from across the globe. Viable economics are at war with the publics' preconception of modern architecture, critics of the development plan have blamed the unpopularity of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century architecture, where buildings of the post-war era are "no longer the height of fashion" and even well-respected examples may "lack topical allure."<sup>37</sup> As Garnett has observed "if this was a perfectly preserved Victorian or Art Deco railway station we were talking about, we wouldn't even be having a discussion over whether or not the terminal should be saved, and who should pay for it. It would simply be being done."<sup>38</sup> The reality is that the protection of any period of buildings never begins in a climate of acceptance when the subject has settled down.<sup>39</sup> That is because if buildings are not considered before then, many of them will not survive. This is most relevant with regard to buildings of the post-war period, yet having come this far, Gander's sole achievement of remaining intact runs the risk of vanishing into the pages of history. As the terminal is relatively new, it seems less obvious to the wider world that it should be retained, and the money found to do so. In another 50 years, this will be a moot point, either our descendants will thank us, or curse us if we fail. Gander International Airport's historic terminal is at a fork in the road, on the verge of either being the Grand Central of the airline industry, or the Penn Station.<sup>40</sup>

In the summer of 2014 a representative of the Newfoundland and Labrador Historic Trust, an organization known for its commitment to the built heritage of the province, spent

36 Severs, "Gander's Glorious Room," 29.

37 B. Cherry, "Foreword," in *Preserving Post-War Heritage: The Care and Conservation of Mid-Twentieth Century Architecture*, ed. Susan Macdonald (Shaftsbury: Donhead, 2001), xix.

38 Garnett, "Where the Sixties never stopped."

39 Saint, Andrew, "Philosophical Principles," 27.

40 Garnett, "Where the Sixties never stopped."



considerable time in Gander, initially to inventory and record the heritage features of the lounge.<sup>41</sup> That Autumn AHI and the GIAA agreed to partner on a study after putting the necessary groundwork in place to consider the problem in a cooperative and creative way. This is explicitly not a plan to preserve the lounge, instead it is an exploration of the problem. Sourcing appropriate funding is currently the stumbling block that is preventing strategic planning from moving forward. Yet the hope of reaching a solution that maintains the lounge's qualities in some form remains precariously alive. As Reg Wright, GIAA President and CEO notes, "there are potential aviation applications of the lounge and also for concepts that dovetail nicely with the airport's goals. I am really hopeful of an adaptive use of the space that is commercially sustainable and at least keeps the spirit of the design intact."<sup>42</sup> (Fig. 5)

### Landmarking: The TWA, New York and Strategies for the Future

Speaking in 1999, David Lowenthal perfectly summed up the predicament:

"We can't go back, we can't save everything, and we can't undo anything. Instead, what we need to do is stress how important [it is] to hand on, not buildings or things, but the traditions of creativity which made it possible for us to have had, and enjoyed for a time, those things. [...] We have to not simply save heritage, but also remember how we revitalize heritage all the time with the additions we make to it, with our own creative, and sometimes destructive, changes. [...] There is no way to avoid this and we should stop being ashamed of it. The more we do to celebrate heritage in the present, the better we will feel, and the better future generations will feel, about what we've done. It will be up to them to change heritage again as they wish."<sup>43</sup>

Modern architectural preservation and conservation provides more challenges for practitioners than for those of earlier eras. Such challenges are also remarkably wide ranging, embracing issues of appropriate repair, adaptation and alteration of modern, sometimes experimental materials with their associated philosophical and technological problems,<sup>44</sup> none more so than in the restoration and renovation of Eero Saarinen's iconic TWA Terminal, New York. The New York International Airport, home of the TWA, strongly identified with the Jet Age. A home to futuristic consumerism, each airline boasted an iconic building with which to entice potential clientele. Ralph S. Damon, the head of TWA was advised by his real estate board to commission Saarinen to design what was to become the original icon of the Jet Age. His vision of the terminal was for "a building that starts your flight with your first glimpse of it and increases your anticipation after you arrive,"<sup>45</sup> and the statement "the spirit of flight, inside and out, and nothing less will do."<sup>46</sup> Designed to express the drama, specialness and excitement of travel, Saarinen and his architectural team had committed themselves to deliver a 'family of forms' within the design. A unique space where "all the curvatures, all the spaces and elements, down to the shapes of signs, information boards, railing counters, would have to have one consistent character."<sup>47</sup>

41 Severs, "Gander's Glorious Room," 29.

42 Ibid., 29.

43 David Lowenthal, "Heritage and History: Perils of the much-loved past," keynote address to the Heritage Canada Foundation Annual Meeting. St. John's, Newfoundland. Reported in *Social Changes and Heritage Strategies: Summaries of Conference Papers* (Ottawa: Heritage Canada, 1999).

44 Bob Kindred, "Introduction," in *Conservation of Modern Architecture*, eds. Susan Macdonald et al (Shaftesbury: Donhead Publishing, 2007), 1.

45 Landmarks Preservation Commission, "Trans World Airlines Flight Centre (now TWA Terminal A) at New York International Airport," Designation List 259, LP-1916, July 19, 1994.

46 Ibid.

47 "Eero Saarinen on his Work," *Horizon Magazine* (June 19, 1959): 76-82.



Fig. 6: The renovated iconic exterior of the TWA Building

Landmarked in 1994,<sup>48</sup> despite objections from the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and Trans World Airlines,<sup>49</sup> the TWA was originally designed to service the flights of propeller craft. The advent of the jet engine, unlike Gander, placed unprecedented strain on the building, struggling to cope with the influx of passenger traffic. The TWA terminal stands as a majestic icon of flights uneasy transition from rarefied romantic event to expedient form of mass transportation.<sup>50</sup> The Landmark assessment paid particular attention to the interior spaces, fixtures and fittings as having “a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.”<sup>51</sup> Despite the findings of the Landmark assessment and its consequential listing, it did little to stem the deterioration of the building. TWA finally went out of business in 2001, and shortly afterwards the building that had been its ultimate advertisement was shuttered, finally succumbing to the obsolescence Rayner Banham warned of in 1962.<sup>52</sup>

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which controlled the building after TWA's collapse, had planned to build a new terminal and conference center to be built alongside and connected to the Saarinen building in order to achieve economic viability. This proposal triggered a heated reaction from the architectural community, who greeted it with apprehension, dread, and antipathy.<sup>53</sup> Most critics feared, with reason, that a change of program would “diminish the authenticity of this singular structure,”<sup>54</sup> insisting that the *function* should be preserved as well as the *form*.<sup>55</sup> This vociferous reaction, the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and questions of financial viability led to the terminal being listed as one of 2003's 11 most endangered places, as named by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.<sup>56</sup> During this period, potential occupation from regional airline JetBlue also fell through. Unable to reach a consensus, and with no other viable interest, the Port Authority simply left the building to “moulder on-site.”<sup>57</sup> (Fig. 6)

48 Landmarks Preservation Commission, 14.

49 Ibid., 1.

50 “TWA's Graceful New Terminal,” quoted in Ezra Stoller, *The TWA Terminal* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 11.

51 Landmarks Preservation Commission, 13.

52 Banham, “The Obsolescent Airport,” 252-253.

53 Suzanne Stephens, “TWA's Fight for Flight: what preserves a landmark most?” *Architectural Record* 189, 11 (Nov 2001): 63.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid., 64.

56 “TWA Terminal placed on National Trust's endangered list,” *Architectural Record* 191, 7 (July 2003): 14.

57 Stephens, “TWA's Fight for Flight.”



Fig. 7: Renovated exterior concrete shell showing original formwork markings

Fig. 8: Detail of the sunken lounge, showing restored 'penny tiles' on stairway, TWA Hotel lounge

Fig. 9: TWA Hotel view from the mezzanine, showing a continuation of TWA's iconic 'chilli pepper' red carpet that once flanked the space

From a conservation standpoint, issues of ageing affect modern architecture rather differently to historic structures; as Allan notes, unlike historic buildings, modern architecture generally needs to “look new in order to look good.”<sup>58</sup> Strategic planning by Beyer Blinder Bell, commissioned by the Port Authority to work on the scheme, identified major restoration issues in need of attention. Their original conference center proposal of 2001, meant that later additions to the exterior of the structure would be scraped away, including a rectangular baggage-handling facility added five years previously on the south side, and the roadway canopy added to the front curb in 1990. Interior finishes that were showing water damage and accumulation of dirt were to be restored to their original state, as well as tackling interior elements that detracted from the original design intention, in particular the redesign of disabled access ramps. They also paid particular attention to the addition of unsympathetic coatings applied to the exterior concrete shell, proposing a sympathetic restoration and sought to specify a sealant that would not mask the luster of the concrete as previous coatings had done. (Fig. 7)

Whilst the strategic plan made sense, lack of commercial interest meant that the Port Authority essentially mothballed plans for the TWA. The building remained empty for the next ten years, until the Port Authority recommissioned Beyer Blinder Bell to tackle the restoration of the existing structure at a cost of \$20million. Standing vacant for over 15 years, the building had essentially become derelict, and rather than a sympathetic renovation for commercial reasons, the architects now found themselves in a position where the main focus of the renovation was in securing the structure. In 2002, Beyer Blinder Bell embarked upon stabilization of the building, rendering it secure and weather-tight. Concurrently, a strategy for restoration and redevelopment was formulated based upon extensive research, interviews with surviving members of the original design team, and the analysis of archival materials. Central objectives of the restoration included removal of inappropriate exterior additions; repair of failing concrete and restoration of the historic landside entrance. Internally the focus of the restoration was on the predominant public areas of the terminal, including the main entrance, the lower and upper lobbies and the flight tubes. The architects also concentrated their efforts on restoring the exterior of the building as well as bringing the building up to legislative code with regard to fire safety. The firm also removed asbestos, repaired the integral flight tubes, and ordered 3.5 million pieces of the 1.5-inch ceramic penny tile (Fig. 8) to match Saarinen's original interior surfacing. By restoring the structure, the Port Authority hoped to secure a client who could ensure the future economic viability, success and longevity of the TWA.

<sup>58</sup> Allan, “Points of Balance,” 16.



In 2015, on its third attempt, the Port Authority finally found a developer willing to take a 75-year lease on the terminal. MCR Development, the owner of dozens of hotels, proposed a restaurant-hotel-conference-center complex around the Flight Centre. Beyer Blinder Bell were brought back on board to add ADA-compliant circulation, to remove two 1970s-era batwing additions to the building, and to research Saarinen's archives at Yale University in order to restore what was the Paris Café and Lisbon Lounge. The former of which was originally outfitted by Raymond Loewy and updated by Thomas Juul-Hansen on the south mezzanine and the Ambassador's Club on the north, where Saarinen collaborated with Florence Knoll on custom furniture. Before the second phase renovation began to turn the TWA into a hotel, Lori Walters, historian and researcher at the Institute for Simulation and Training at the University of Central Florida organized a team from ChronoPoints<sup>59</sup> to digitally document the historically significant structure through 3D laser scanning. Walters and ChronoPoints' scanning and education projects are a continuation of the historic dedication to preserving and remembering the TWA building in some form, creating a digital preservation by record for future generations. (Fig. 8, 9, 10)

The transformation of the TWA building is a success story for a building once on the most endangered list. Successfully overcoming the skepticism of the Port Authority, that this icon of modernist design and now a decrepit property, designed to obsolete standards and inhibited by landmark status was capable of being upgraded to compete with a new build alternative; the long road to successful renovation and conversion finally meeting a perfect client. The process in turn has also overcome the skepticism of conservationists, architectural academics, historians and the general public that altering the function of the TWA would cut it off from the real activity of the airport, as well as divorce it from its symbolic function of flight<sup>60</sup> as well as the skepticism of the hospitality sector that they could operate satisfactorily in the building, if TWA's capacity to change was curtailed by inflexible design or conservation constraints. The final point has been addressed by locating the hotel rooms outside of the Saarinen structure, whilst employing a coherence of design throughout. (Fig. 11, 12)

The process has been challenging. In order to create a workable template, Beyer Blinder Bell had to remove baggage carousels, replace the front curtain wall, repair the roofs concrete shell and restore the iconic sunken lounge. The restoration of which relied heavily on the Saarinen Archives at Yale University. Many of the building's most iconic elements have been well-preserved, and will be revitalized in new ways as the hotel opens to the public. The Sunken Lounge, with its rich red upholstery and Solari departures board, is now a cocktail bar. The former Paris Café has been reborn, and the red carpeted tunnels that connect the 1962 building to JetBlue's newer Terminal 5 lead hotel guests to their rooms, which are located in two semi-circular buildings that flank the historic structure. There are also nods to the history of Trans World Airlines, artefacts from the airline's history including uniforms and flatware, have been placed on display in a small museum on the lower level and design aficionados can pass the time in mid-century glory in the Phaidon reading room. All of these conceits reference an explicit desire of MCR Developments to create an authentic 1962 experience,<sup>61</sup> a nod to a "static past where things were never nicer,"<sup>62</sup> where the world was simpler and the promise of the Jet Age was just that, a promise. Ultimately the TWA has achieved what many thought impossible, a sustainable future, however nostalgic, that will ensure its continued survival. (Fig. 12)

59 ChronoPoints is a research lab at the University of Central Florida's Institute for Simulation and Training dedicated to digitally documenting historically significant mid-century structures and artefacts.

60 Stephens, "TWA's Fight for Flight."

61 Amy Plitt, "The TWA Hotel, a spectacular mid-century time capsule, finally opens," *Curbed New York* (May 15, 2019).

62 Elizabeth C. Cromley, "Public history and the historic preservation district," in *Past Meets Present: Essays about historic interpretation and public audiences*, ed. Jo Blatti (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 32.



Fig. 10: The restored sunken lounge at the TWA Hotel

Fig. 11: Mezzanine seating area, sympathetically restored to the 1962 design

Fig. 12: Room with a view. TWA Hotel room incorporating authentic items from 1962. Authentic rotary dial telephones were sourced from eBay

### New Prospects for Gander Airport International Lounge

The successful conservation of the TWA, which could so easily have been a failure, inspires a hopeful optimism for the future of modernist airport buildings. Many have fallen by the wayside of history, altered beyond recognition to cope with the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Currently the international lounge at Gander Airport has had a stay of execution. On the 28<sup>th</sup> August 2019 the Gander International Airport Authority (GIIA) announced a \$1.5 million project to address the preservation, restoration and adaptive reuse of the space with a focus on the Golden Age of Aviation and the historic legacy of Gander.<sup>63</sup> Essentially the project aims to tie in with those of the successful adaptive reuse of the TWA, a museum/community space designed to promote the iconography of the Jet Age and its importance, in an attempt to encourage tourism to this otherwise overlooked airport. Douglas Haskell writing in the *Architectural Forum* in 1958 described Saarinen's TWA as an architectural intervention demonstrating "a popular need ... for more drama: a 'good show', symbolism, even fairy tales"<sup>64</sup>; the proposal for Gander intends to provide just that. An architectural exemplar of a modernist fairy tale of the escapist promise of flight, through interpretive storytelling elements highlighting the historic significance of the airport, providing a window into its all too brief heyday when the glamorous elite came to town.

However nostalgically unapologetic, the proposed scheme will preserve the International Lounge at least for the foreseeable future. Like the TWA, later additions are planned to be removed, for example the glass security tunnel. Visitor numbers to the newly opened TWA Hotel have prompted Tyler Morse, chief executive of the MCR developments to boast of a 200% occupancy rate.<sup>65</sup> This kind of success for Gander is likely to remain elusive, yet the proposed redevelopment of the International Lounge and the tourist revenue that will inspire provides a glimmer of hope for its continued survival.

In the case of Gander the possibilities are evident; the GIIA's scheme seeks to tap in to its potential as an economic catalyst using the International Lounge as a "spine or foundation"<sup>66</sup> to build from in order to effect positive change in the rest of the airport. This is not a case of salvaging remnants, but instead conserving the entirety that remains – the accidental, perfect slice of 1959 in a remote outpost in Newfoundland that was once the crossroads of the world. Allan has observed that "old Modernism was long seen as the expression of flawed hope ... but when the sceptics look afresh at what well conserved – that is 'well adapted' – Modernism is capable of becoming, even they may begin to appreciate it."<sup>67</sup> It is hopeful that this will be the case for Gander Airport; perhaps in the historic curation and maintenance of modernist aviation typologies, the latent wisdom of form follows function will emerge.

63 "Airport Authority Announces Plans to Restore International Lounge," last accessed August 28 2019, <http://www.ganderairport.com/article/airport-authority-announces-plans-to-restore-international-lounge/>.

64 Douglas Haskell, "Airports for Tomorrow," *Architectural Forum* (January 1958): 123-125.

65 Keiko Morris, "TWA Terminal at Kennedy Airport Targets 200% Occupancy," *The Wall Street Journal* (May 14 2019).

66 Garrett Barry, "Nostalgia meets reinvention: Gander's legendary airport celebrates 60 years," CBC/Radio Canada, last accessed June 23, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/gander-airport-lounge-departures-international-announcement-1.5182871>.

67 Allan, "Points of Balance," 44.



## REFERENCE LIST:

- "Airport Authority Announces Plans to Restore International Lounge." <http://www.ganderairport.com/article/airport-authority-announces-plans-to-restore-international-lounge/>. Last accessed August 28, 2019.
- Allan, John. "Points of Balance: Patterns of Practice in the Conservation of Modern Architecture." In *Conservation of Modern Architecture*, edited by Susan Macdonald, Kyle Normandin, and Bob Kindred: 13-46. Shaftesbury: Donhead Publishing, 2007.
- Banham, Reyner. "The Obsolescent Airport." *Architectural Review* 788 (October 1962): 252-253.
- Barry, Garrett. "Nostalgia meets reinvention: Gander's legendary airport celebrates 60 years." CBC/Radio Canada. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/gander-airport-lounge-departures-international-announcement-1.5182871>. Last accessed September 9, 2019.
- Cherry, Bridget. "Foreword." In *Preserving Post-War Heritage: The Care and Conservation of Mid-Twentieth Century Architecture*, edited by Susan Macdonald: i-xxi. Shaftesbury: Donhead, 2001.
- Cromley, Elizabeth C. "Public history and the historic preservation district." In *Past Meets Present: Essays about historic interpretation and public audiences*, edited by Jo Blatti: 30-36. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987.
- "Eero Saarinen on his Work." *Horizon Magazine* (June 19, 1959): 76-82.
- Garnett, Andrew. "Where the Sixties never stopped swinging (Gander International Airport, Canada)" (September 10, 2014). <https://thebeautyoftransport.com/2014/09/10/where-the-sixties-never-stopped-swinging-gander-international-airport-canada/>. Last accessed July 5, 2019.
- Gollner, Adam. "Gander Airport: When the going Was Good." *New York Times* (March 20, 2005).
- Haskell, Douglas. "Airports for Tomorrow." *Architectural Forum* (January 1958): 123-125.
- Lowenthal, David. "Heritage and History: Perils of the much-loved past." Keynote address to the Heritage Canada Foundation Annual Meeting. St. John's, Newfoundland. Reported in *Social Changes and Heritage Strategies: Summaries of Conference Papers*. Ottawa: Heritage Canada, 1999.
- Lowenthal, David. *The Past is a Foreign Country*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Macdonald, Nancy. "An airport that time, happily, forgot: for design aficionados, Gander's languishing air terminal is a forgotten modernist treasure." *Maclean's* (April 23, 2007): 56.
- Mellin, Robert. *Newfoundland Modern: Architecture in the Smallwood Years 1949-1972*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011.
- Morris, Keiko, "TWA Terminal at Kennedy Airport Targets 200% Occupancy." *The Wall Street Journal* (May 14 2019).
- National Post. "Gander international airport's historic lounge at risk amid growing costs" (last modified January 24 2015). <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/gander-international-airports-historic-lounge-at-risk-amid-growing-costs>. Last accessed July 5, 2019.
- Pearman, Hugh. *Airports: A Century of Architecture*. London: Laurence King, 2004.
- Plitt, Amy. "The TWA Hotel, a spectacular mid-century time capsule, finally opens." *Curbed New York* (May 15, 2019).
- Saint, Andrew. "Philosophical Principles of Modern Conservation." In *Modern Matters: Principles and Practice in Conserving Recent Architecture*, edited by Susan Macdonald: 15-28. Shaftesbury: Donhead Publishing, 1996.
- Severs, Jane. "Gander's Glorious Room." *Canadian Architect* (March 12, 2015): 28-29.
- Stephens, Suzanne. "TWA's Fight for Flight: what preserves a landmark most?" *Architectural Record* 189, 11 (Nov 2001).
- Stoller, Ezra. *The TWA Terminal*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999.
- Stubbs, John H., and Emily G. Makas. *Architectural Conservation in Europe and the Americas*. London: John Wiley & Sons, 2011.
- Landmarks Preservation Commission. "Trans World Airlines Flight Centre (now TWA Terminal A) at New York International Airport." Designation List 259, LP-1916 (July 19, 1994).
- "TWA Terminal placed on National Trust's endangered list." *Architectural Record* 191, 7 (July 2003).
- Waldron, Andrew. "Modernism in Canadian Architecture: An Overview." Paper presented at *Conserving the Modern in Canada: Buildings, ensembles and sites*. Trent University, Peterborough, May 6-8, 2005.

## ILLUSTRATION CREDITS:

Fig. 1-5: Photographer Zach Bonnell, images used with permission.

Fig. 6-12: Photographer Cord Struckmann, images used with permission.